

The Shepherd's Voice
John 10:22-30
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It has long been the dream of human beings to be able to communicate with our animal friends. Can you imagine how much money is spent each year studying dolphin squeaks and monkey hoots to see if they are actually saying anything? The movies often play on this fantasy: the talking pig in "Babe," the mouse in "Stuart Little," the spider in "Charlotte's Web."

Well, according to Christian author Leonard Sweet, the Japanese have made some real-life advances in this area. According to an article, the Japanese have created technology that translates dogs' barks into human words. A transmitter chip and speaker are put into the dog's collar, and each "yip" or "arf" is translated and reported in human words. This technology does not work for cats; c'mon, that would just be silly.

The barks are translated into six different categories, like Happy, Sad, or On Guard. When the doorbell rings, you may hear a bark and then the words, "Watch out." Or when you come in from getting the paper, you may be greeted by an electronic voice saying, "You're home! You're home!" The device can also count the number of times your dog barks while you are away, so that you can ensure he's isn't making any unauthorized long-distance phone calls.

Granted, this sounds a little far-fetched. When you walk into the room with a new dress on, can the dog really be saying, "You're going to wear THAT?" And I'm not quite sure that when you forget to let your dog outside he really says, "I'm calling my lawyer." Still, the concept is intriguing. Oh, the device is called the "Bow-lingual."

A lot of pet owners would tell you they don't need the "Bow-lingual." If you own a pet long enough, we have come to believe that you can begin to interact and understand each other. The longer we are with the pet, the better we know each other.

That's the point Jesus is getting to in our passage today. While teaching at the Temple, he is approached by a group of Jews: "Look, you've kept us waiting too long. If you're the Messiah, tell us right now." But Jesus realizes that a positive answer to that question wouldn't do any good, because, although he was the Messiah, he wasn't the Messiah they were expecting. He also knows that the fact they even need to ask the question shows they haven't been paying attention. If they'd been watching him, they would have seen he was the Messiah by the way he embodied God in his words and behavior. But, he says, they didn't see this because they weren't looking for it.

To make this point, Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep. This analogy would have been a familiar one to those listening to Jesus, because shepherding was a common occupation back then. And the relationship a shepherd shared with his sheep was more than just one driven by duty. They spent so much time together that they were more like pet and its owner.

We may think of sheep as slobbering, smelly, dumb animals that only exist to be shaved or served in a restaurant, but they are actually fairly intelligent creatures. One way we can know is how you herd them. To herd cows, you have to get behind them and push and prod and poke. But to herd sheep, you walk in front of them, and they follow. Sheep will not go anywhere unless someone else goes first – and that's the shepherd's job.

We also know sheep are intelligent because of their ability to pick out their shepherd's voice. Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that at the end of the day, several flocks of sheep would gather at the same watering hole for a drink before the walk home. The flocks would intermingle as they drank, but the shepherds didn't worry about losing one of their own. When the time came, the shepherd would make a distinctive sound – a cluck of the tongue, a two-note whistle – and his sheep would instantly recognize that peculiar sound as their shepherd's voice. They would pull away from the watering hole and follow their shepherd home.

John, who wrote this gospel, has an important reason for relaying Jesus' comments about sheep. His own flock, the church he founded, had been infiltrated by false shepherds, teachers who were perpetrating a gospel contrary to the one of Jesus Christ. And the sad thing is that some of John's flock were beginning to believe them. They had stopped listening to their Shepherd's voice.

Are we just as vulnerable? Just think how many voices are out there clamoring for our attention. We're bombarded from the moment the alarm clock goes off with music or a buzzer - our breakfast table conversations, business meetings, grocery store dialogues, cell phone conversations, TV shows, the irritating hum of traffic, the spiel of the telemarketer. The cacophony of sound is almost constant. The best word to describe it is a "din," which Webster's defines as "a loud, confused noise." Is there a more accurate way to describe what faces us each day?

In the midst of all the sounds we hear on a daily basis, in the middle of all the voices competing for our attention, how are we supposed to hear the voice of our Shepherd? The only way we will recognize it is if we hear it again and again. Often times I'll hear someone on TV and think, "I know that voice from somewhere!" But I don't recognize it because I hear it so infrequently.

Do we hear God's voice so infrequently that we don't recognize it? I'm not talking about a physical conversation. While that would be nice, God speaks to us in others ways. Do you have trouble hearing Him? So do I. We have to be patient. Sometimes it's a whistle and sometimes it's a cluck. Sometimes it's through a Bible passage, or through prayer, or through our conversations with each other. But our Shepherd does speak to us, and every word spoken has some distinctive elements to it that sets it apart, much like the cluck or the whistle of an earthly shepherd.

First, our Shepherd will always speak a word of hope. Hope is what our faith is grounded upon. Hope sees God at work even in the darkest of circumstances. As Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." If the voice we hear speaks of despair and doom and fatalism, it's probably not the voice of the Shepherd.

The Shepherd also speaks a word of trust. So many voices in our world today speak of fear or skepticism, telling us to be on our guard against someone else. But our Shepherd casts out fear from our lives. Jesus says, "No one can snatch my sheep out of my hand." If the voice invites distrust, it's probably not the voice of the Shepherd.

Forgiveness is another thing we can hear in our Shepherd's voice. Christ came to this earth and died on a cross so we would know the power of forgiveness. Yet so many voices today speak of revenge, or hatred, or the differences that keep us apart. If the voice is promoting an eye for any eye, if we hear an "us vs. them" mentality, it's not the voice of the Shepherd.

Finally, the Shepherd will always speak a word of truth. It may not be the word we want to hear, because the truth being told may be about us. It may call us out for being less than Godly in our words and actions. If the voice only tells you how great you are, or only tells you how bad you are, it's definitely not the voice of the Shepherd.

God breaks through the loud, confused noise of our world to speak words of hope, trust, forgiveness, and truth. And as we hear the voice of the Shepherd, we are called to echo that voice. We are called to speak words of hope, trust, forgiveness, and truth. As Molly increases her vocabulary, she learns words by repeating everything we say. She's like a parrot. She's learned the words to the "Gloria Patri" because she hears us sing it every week, so she'll go around the house singing, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Homey Boat." She's close. And as she continues to learn, she'll continue to sing, echoing the words she has learned on Sunday as she lives on Monday. How about us? Do the words we say on Monday sound anything like the words we hear Christ speak on Sunday? Do we go around the house, or around school, or around work repeating what we've heard, singing God's praises? Do we hear the voice in worship and then forget what we've been told? Or do we sound like our Shepherd?

In his book "Testimony," Tom Long tells the story about a conversation he had with a prominent church leader from the former Soviet Union. Long asked him what it was like to try to live out your faith in such a hostile and controlled environment. The Russian leader said it was quite difficult. KGB agents would infiltrate the church, posing as clergy. He said he would go to church meetings and see the spies in their midst.

"We always knew who they were," he said. "You did? How?" said Long. "I thought they were secret agents." "Oh, they were, but we could tell," he said. "There was something in their voice that gave them away."

Something in their voice. You can do all kinds of things to disguise yourself, but the voice holds the true essence of a person. What you say and how you say it reveal a truth, not just about you, but about the One to whom you listen.

When you speak, what do people hear? Do they hear a loud, confused noise, or do they hear a word of truth, a word of forgiveness, a word of compassion? Do they hear in your voice the echo of the Good Shepherd's voice? As we speak, I wonder if the world would know us as Christians by the sound of our voices.